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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001375

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR SA SY IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TO MEET NASRALLAH SOON?

REF: A. BEIRUT 1349

1B. BEIRUT 1360

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Rumors are growing of an imminent meeting between majority leader Saad Hariri and Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, especially after Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's representatives met with Hizballah officials earlier in the week to discuss security issues. However, Hariri's advisor Ghattas Khoury remains firm that Hizballah has not yet sufficiently accepted responsibility for the May violence, Hariri's primary pre-condition for meeting Nasrallah. Nevertheless, Hariri told the Ambassador on September 17 that he was feeling mounting pressure to meet Nasrallah. End summary.

HARIRI CONDITIONS MEETING
ON AN APOLOGY

12. (C) Though rumors of a meeting between majority leader Saad Hariri and Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah had abounded throughout the summer months, it increasingly is appearing that a meeting will indeed occur. Hariri told the Ambassador on September 13 he would "probably want to do the meeting" (Ref A).

13. (C) At an iftar he hosted on September 17, Hariri told the Ambassador that he was feeling mounting pressure to meet with Hizballah. His advisor, Ghattas Khoury, told LES Senior Political Advisor that President Michel Sleiman is pushing for such a meeting. (Note: Representatives from Druze leQr Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and Hizballah officials met on September 15, Ref B, to discuss security issues in what some see as a preview of an eventual Hariri-Nasrallah meeting. End note.)

14. (C) Hariri publicly seemed to lay the groundwork when he publicly stated on September 16 that "reconciliations take place with political adversaries..., and not with allies. Those who want to go to reconciliation have to be courageous and bold."

15. (C) Pro-opposition Al-Akhbar said in its September 18 edition that preparations were being made and that Hariri had overcome his reservations. Khoury downplayed the report

within hours of its publication, stating, "We had informed President Sleiman that he can proceed with the required contacts to facilitate the meeting, but if they (Hizballah officials) don't want to apologize to Beirut, there is no need to open old wounds." Criticizing Nasrallah's recent remarks in which he defended Hizballah's actions in May, Khoury said that if the meeting is to be held, "there should be agreement on a number of principles, because using weapons for domestic purposes strips the resistance of its reason to exist."

PRE-CONDITIONS, SECURITY
CONCERNS REMAIN UNRESOLVED

¶6. (S) Privately, Khoury told LES Senior Political Advisor prior to his public statement that Hizballah has yet to assume responsibility for the May violence and "heal the wounds," a condition Hariri is requesting prior to meeting Nasrallah. Separately, PSP Minister Wael Abu Faour described a proposal he attributed to Sleiman in which Hizballah MP Mohammed Raad would visit Hariri's residence at Qoreitem as a gesture of goodwill. Abu Faour said that Hariri rejected this proposal, demanding instead a larger Hizballah delegation that would express some sort of apology. Hizballah security official Wafiq Safa purportedly proposed to Hariri bringing a large Hizballah delegation (minus Nasrallah, due to security concerns) to Qoreitem to apologize, paving the way for Hariri to pay a later visit to Nasrallah (Ref B).

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¶7. (C) Further, Abu Faour added, selecting a secure location remains problematic. According to Faour, Nasrallah rejected Sleiman's offer to hold the meeting at the presidential palace out of security concerns.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) If Hariri were to overcome his need for some sort of apology prior to meeting Nasrallah there still remains the issue of selecting a location. This would not be the first time he has backed down to Hizballah; prior to convening in Doha, Hariri had refused to give the opposition a blocking third in parliament, but ultimately relented during the negotiations. Even if they could agree on a relatively neutral ground, Nasrallah would fear security leaks. His public appearances are rare, brief, and unannounced. Keeping quiet about the location, while giving Hariri enough assurances to feel comfortable, will not be an easy feat. It is also possible that Saudi Arabia, which has influenced Hariri's thinking in the past, has not yet given the green light to such a meeting. End comment.

SISON